Class, Consumption, and the Environment

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On March 9, 2001, the Hagley Center for the History of Business, Technology and Society hosted a one-day conference, "Consumption and the Environment," in Wilmington, Delaware. The idea for the conference and the selection of papers were the work of graduate students in the University of Delaware's Hagley Program in the History of Technology and Industrialization. The organizers made a deliberate effort to "integrate studies of production and consumption," "highlight the social implications of seemingly personal decisions," and explore how changing understandings of the environment have shaped consumption choices.

This conference brought together a diverse group of graduate students and faculty members from across the country. How often have historians of consumption, technology, the environment, food, labor, agriculture, and gender spent an entire day in the same room addressing issues of common interest? Participants demonstrated ways to bridge traditional dichotomies like production vs. consumption and technological "progress" vs. environmental and social "declension." While the conference title neglected to mention class, nearly all participants wove this subject into their discussions of consumption and the environment. Throughout history, socioeconomic groups have defined themselves, and others, by the way individuals understood, enjoyed, and consumed "nature" and "the environment." When social boundaries are reinforced through physical segregation, those with more money and power have often escaped (or at least delayed) facing the consequences of consumption by exporting their problems to poorer regions and people. While this conference self-consciously explored the past, its lessons and conclusions clearly contribute to understanding the world today.

Joel Tarr (Richard S. Caliguiri Professor of Urban and Environmental History at Carnegie Mellon University) delivered the keynote address: "Environment, Consumption and the Urban Hinterland." Tarr proposed examining the city-hinterland relationship in three dimensions: consumption of basic necessities (food, fuel, and water); waste disposal; and consumption of land. He then suggested three possible approaches: life-cycle analysis, to determine what and when people knew about a product's effects on the environment and how they dealt with that knowledge (e.g., the transformation of CFCs from miracle refrigerant to ozone threat); industrial ecology, to determine the actual impact of consumption on the environment over time; and social and cultural history.

All nine panelists and three commentators addressed various aspects of these themes. It is impossible in this short space to convey the rich conversations that resulted. Instead, the remainder of this review focuses on three case stud-

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 61, Spring 2002, pp. 173–176

ies that combined issues of class, consumption, and the environment to give a sense of the intellectual intersections created by the conference.

Marguerite S. Shaffer (Miami University, Ohio) opened the first panel, "Reframing the Environment." Shaffer's paper, "Consuming Nature: Tourism and the Landscape of Leisure," traced the transformation of tourism from "an elite pastime to a popular phenomenon" between 1880 and 1940. During the mid-nineteenth century, dramatic natural scenery celebrated by writers and landscape artists—the White Mountains, the Hudson River Valley, Niagara Falls—became popular attractions for genteel tourists seeking sublime vistas. Railroads like the Baltimore and Ohio (which called itself the "picturesque line of America") promoted scenic tours with observation cars, rustic "log palace" hotels, and "authentic" Indian powwows. After the Civil War, competing transcontinental railroads opened western wonders like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon to tourism. These corporations did more than simply transport visitors: "Through careful design marketing, they created scripted landscapes, mixing together an eclectic range of references that blended sublime scenery and civilized taste and style with frontier imagery and a benign version of Manifest Destiny." In short, they "helped to transform the tourist ideal of nature from a genteel aesthetic to a brand-name consumer spectacle." After World War I, the automobile further transformed nature tourism from passive viewing to active participation through camping, hiking, riding, and fishing. Nature now emerged "as a recreational and therapeutic space," providing "a glimpse of the strenuous life and an opportunity for regenerative play."

Throughout this period, American tourists used their encounters with nature not just for recreation and regeneration, but also to define class boundaries. Middle-class tourists complained of "the class of people that will attend small excursions," whose loud voices and boisterous behavior betrayed an apparent lack of reverence for nature. By defining the nature experience in terms of class, "tourists further linked nature to the social and economic relations of modern consumer culture." By World War II, nature became "not simply an antidote to the ills of the urban-industrial society, but, more importantly, it became one more product to be consumed."

In the second panel, "Cultivating Markets," John Soluri (Carnegie Mellon University) used his paper, "(Trans)Gendering the Banana: Monocultures, Supermarkets, and the Birth of Miss Chiquita, 1929–1972," to explore the unintended social and environmental consequences abroad resulting from consumption choices made in the United States.

Bananas remained a luxury in the United States until the 1870s, when steamships and expanding railroad networks facilitated the distribution of this highly perishable fruit. As bananas gained popularity, a new form of cultivation emerged: large single-crop plantations. By 1900 most exporters preferred a single variety, the *Gros Michael,* for its flavor, pleasing yellow color, and bruise resistant skin. But the *Gros Michael* was vulnerable to a soil fungus known as Panama Disease. Large-scale monoculture made the problem worse: concentrating banana trees in huge plantations helped the fungus to spread rapidly, and by

1930 virtually all banana-growing regions were affected. Although disease-resistant varieties were available by the 1920s, exporters and jobbers (not, apparently, actual consumers) decided that these bananas were not marketable. For example, the *Lacatan* reportedly tasted exactly like the *Gros Michael* but was rejected because of its unattractive color, "a rather dull gray-green." Consequently, rather than change varieties, growers abandoned infected areas and cut down huge tracts of virgin jungle to establish new plantations. When growers left, workers and the local farmers who provisioned them faced unemployment and economic ruin. After the 1960s, fruit companies switched to a new variety that required boxes to prevent bruising (instead of simply stacking bananas in the hold) and chemical treatment to prevent disease. The new packing plants provided jobs for women but disrupted traditional Latin American family norms. Furthermore, repeated exposure to chemicals reportedly left many workers sterile. Thus, consumer choice (or, more accurately, marketers' *perception* of consumer preference) had unintended (and largely invisible to U.S. consumers) social *and* environmental consequences for Latin America.

Finally, in "Energy Consumption without Consequence? Coal Gasification and Pollution Displacement in Industrial Britain," Peter Thorsheim (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) explored links between class, technological choice, and pollution. In nineteenth-century Britain, coal not only powered factories and locomotives, it fueled household cooking and heating fires, too. Middle- and upper-class Britons insulated themselves somewhat from the dirt and dangers of coal by relying on working-class miners, deliverymen, domestic servants, industrial stokers, and chimney sweeps to produce, burn, and clean up after coal. By mid-century, however, even the most privileged could not escape the smoke and soot that darkened the sky and deposited grime everywhere, even indoors. Many believed that improved technology could solve this pollution problem. But when new stove designs and alternatives to bituminous coal failed to catch on, clean-air advocates turned to substituting gas for coal as the best way to reduce the smoke problem.

Although gas burned cleaner and significantly reduced smoke and soot in cities, the switch to gas merely displaced the problem from urban neighborhoods to the vicinity of gasworks in outlying areas. Workers produced gas by heating coal in closed ovens to approximately 2,000 degrees. This extreme heat released coal gas—which was piped into the city—and left behind coke, an industrial fuel that burned cleaner than coal. However, this process also yielded sulfurous acid, ammonia, tar, and other byproducts that polluted the ground, air and water around gasification plants. Furthermore, these plants used soot-producing bituminous coal to heat the gas-producing ovens. Gas workers endured unpleasant working conditions in the hot, foul-smelling plants and faced health risks from burns, respiratory ailments, and cancer. Their families suffered as well. Gasworks, like other offensive and polluting industries, were typically built in poor working-class neighborhoods where land was cheap, labor plentiful, and residents had little power to oppose such projects. "In cases where gasworks were built in middle-class neighborhoods, land values usually declined, and those who

could afford to move away from the 'smoke, smells . . . [and] effluvia' of gasworks tended to leave." Gasification displaced the pollution associated with energy use from the place of consumption to the place of production. In the process, the poorest members of society lived first-hand with a disproportionate amount of that society's pollution.

Overall, this conference succeeded without question. Papers and discussions clearly illustrated how seemingly personal consumption choices in the past—from food to fuel to tourism—have had unforeseen consequences for entire cultures and ecosystems. The interdisciplinary makeup of participants and audience provided a refreshing variety of perspectives and approaches to the questions posed by speakers. While this brief conference was hardly the last word on these subjects, it set an example for what we can hope is a new, cross-disciplinarily trend in studies of class, consumption, and the environment.